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THEORY AND GOD IN GOTHAM

JON BUTLER

ABSTRACT

"Theory" is all the rage among religious studies scholars generally. But with the tiniest number of exceptions, this is not true in American religious history. American history in general has not proven receptive to theoretically oriented scholarship, and American religious history may epitomize this aversion; most histories of religion in America follow the classic forms of narrative history. Yet the study of religion in modern urban America illustrates the desirability and perhaps even the inevitability of rethinking both religion and modernity. Without rethinking modernity, especially the assumption of its secularity, our histories cannot explain or even adequately describe the remarkable resilience of religion in so seemingly secular a place as Manhattan. And without rethinking religion we may not be able to comprehend its ability to thrive and to embrace uncertainty and spiritual pluralism alike.

Theory. In America, meaning the United States, it is not an easy word. This isn't just according to Jerry Falwell or Pat Robertson. Theory has been the bogeyperson of American politics not merely in the last twenty years but obviously stretching back to Andrew Jackson and possibly to the religious revivals of the 1740s. When the mid-eighteenth-century Presbyterian Gilbert Tennent insisted that Christian clergymen needed not just theological training but a born-again experience, and when New England's flamboyant awakener James Davenport burned books in New London, their doubts about the sufficiency of learning generally scarcely provided a foundation for valuing theological inquiry, much less theory. Theory not only epitomizes higher learning but may exemplify its highest attainment—generalization about the human condition, its dynamics, and its causes.

Yet it was Alexis De Tocqueville, not an American, who became the principal interpreter, indeed theorizer, of Jacksonian democracy. Americans' disdain for advanced learning and theoretical abstraction in late nineteenth-century America led the twentieth-century historian, Richard Hofstadter, to write one of his most famous books, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life*. Mark Noll's *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* urges twentieth-century evangelicals to abandon their cultivated learninglessness. And when the Fox Channel's Bill O'Reilly pillories faculty guests, O'Reilly's disdain for the professoriate is manifest in his gleefully sarcastic greeting, "Well, PROFESSOR!"[1]

1. Harry S. Stout and Peter Onuf, "James Davenport and the Great Awakening in New London," *Journal of American History* 70 (1983), 556-578; Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism in*

Theory has done a little better among historians of American religion, but not much. "Theory" indeed is a mainstay of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, and many recent searches for assistant professors of religion have highlighted an ability to work in theory. But most of theory's practitioners focus on religion outside the United States. In American religious history, and even among the youngest scholars, narrative history without explicit evocation of theory still reigns. Some years ago, it seemed almost necessary for new and established historians alike to cite Clifford Geertz in an early footnote, but they usually cited his anthropological work generally rather than his specifically religious scholarship. The Geertz footnote stuck out like the proverbial sore thumb because most of the histories it graced looked much like histories without Geertz. Thus, "narrative history" with no obvious theoretical orientation triumphed over many theories and "methods"—witness the near-stillbirth of quantitative history—and biographies and histories of particular groups and events still comprise the overwhelming majority of historical publications.[2]

For generations, American religious history simply was denominational history, meaning the history of group identity, doctrine, and ecclesiology. Then Perry Miller's stunning histories of Puritanism written from the 1930s into the 1950s changed the status, if not the method, of religion as an object of study in American history. Miller's Puritans moved from objects of intellectual scorn to originators of American identity. Miller lifted Puritans from their status as antimodern sectarians to intellectuals of not inconsiderable conceptual achievement and elevated the discussion of Puritanism and religion generally, or at least American Protestantism, to unprecedented heights.[3]

In the wake of Miller's achievement, Henry May tied religion to the shaping of the American industrial order and progressivism, even if he found its efforts more than wanting. Timothy L. Smith linked urban revivals to the power of antebellum reform in education, women's rights, and abolition, and challenged the portrait of American religion as rural and retrograde. Later histories celebrated the religious origins of the civil rights crusades of the 1950s and 1960s (but expressed

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American Life (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1963); Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1994); David S. Brown, *Richard Hofstadter: An Intellectual Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 120-141.

2. Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740–1790* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 410, where the reference is to Geertz's general anthropological work, specifically, "On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding," *American Scientist* 63 (1975), 47-48. See also Isaac, "Evangelical Revolt: The Nature of the Baptists' Challenge to the Traditional Order in Virginia, 1765 to 1775," *William and Mary Quarterly* 31 (1974), 352, and "Dramatizing the Ideology of the Revolution: Popular Mobilization in Virginia, 1774 to 1776," *William and Mary Quarterly* 3d ser., 33 (1976), 364, where the references also are to Geertz's general anthropological work rather than to his scholarship on religion. On Geertz's fate among religion scholars, see Kevin Schilbrack, "Religion, Models of, and Reality: Are We Through with Geertz?," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73 (2005), 429-452; James West Davidson, "The New Narrative History: How New? How Narrative?," *Reviews in American History* 12:3 (1984), 322-334.

3. Perry Miller, *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts, 1630–1650: A Genetic Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933); Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1939); Perry Miller, "Errand into the Wilderness," *William and Mary Quarterly* 3d ser., 10 (1953), 3-32; Avihu Zakai, "'Epiphany at Matadi': Perry Miller's *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts* and the Meaning of American History," *Reviews in American History* 13:4 (1985), 627-641.

puzzlement about the religious foundations of the New Christian Right). These books superseded the old denominational histories because they concentrated not on religious institutions but placed religion at the very center of American culture.[4]

Still, Miller and his successors avoided defining religion even as they enlarged the implications of religion for American culture. They analyzed the ways religion acted and described how religion shaped the American landscape. But they seldom discussed what religion was, although they moved through a welter of Congregational, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, or Jewish clergy and laity organized to change the world through principles underwritten by denominational commitments and theological convictions.

The appearance of one distinctly non-theoretical history substantially changed the direction of both American and western European religious history because it focused on commonplace religious sentiment rather than on institutions and formal theology. The book was Keith Thomas's *Religion and the Decline of Magic*. Its 700-plus pages moved relentlessly from fact to fact and example to example with a luxury of detail breathtaking in its comprehensiveness, and which represented a mind-boggling amount of research. Thomas's encyclopedic survey of non-institutional religious expression in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England made a profoundly influential and simple point: the religious inclinations and behaviors of the laity could not be ignored in understanding how religion worked in the early modern world. Whether from the believers' own perspectives or from the standpoint of both Catholic and Protestant authorities, the religious proclivities of the laity profoundly shaped public and private religiosity alike.[5]

Thomas's vivid portrait of unstable and eclectic lay religiosity stimulated a major reconceptualization of early modern Western religion on both sides of the Atlantic. It suggested that, at best, traditional church history walked tenuously over a seemingly chaotic but subtly structured personal and popular religiosity that extended far beyond the expectations and demands of Europe's powerful institutional religions. Thomas's findings were not unique. Lucien Febvre had anticipated them decades earlier in *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century*, and Carlo Ginzburg reinforced Thomas's vision in *The Cheese and the Worms*, with its portrayal of dangerous non-Christian supernaturalism in sixteenth-century Italy. But Thomas became an explicit model for major new work in what first was termed "popular religion" and later "lived religion" (they are not the same, but that need not deter us here).[6]

4. Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestantism on the Eve of the Civil War* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1957); Henry F. May, *Protestant Churches and Industrial America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1949); Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820–1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978); David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986).

5. Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971).

6. *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, ed. David D. Hall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Lucien Febvre, *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century: The Religion of Rabelais*, transl. Beatrice Gottlieb [1942] (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982); Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmology of a Sixteenth-Century Italian*

Perhaps the contrast between Thomas and the best known theoretical work on religion produced by an American scholar will make the point. William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) stunned many contemporaries and fit an outpouring of late-nineteenth-century anthropological and theoretical work on religion, ranging from Frazier to Durkheim. But *Varieties of Religious Experience* stimulated no change at all in writing the history of religion in America, perhaps in part because James used historical examples so indiscriminately; James discussed Augustine, Marcus Aurelius, and George Fox with little regard for differences in time and culture. Not surprisingly, when historians of American religion began probing popular religion after 1960, they seldom offered James as a model for their work.[7]

History is not, of course, without its theory. But the existence of *History and Theory* as a journal also suggests the awkward place theory occupies within the discipline of history. The title of an interview with the influential early American historian Bernard Bailyn about the nature of history makes the point deftly: "Sometimes an Art, Never a Science, Always a Craft." Historians value specific contexts, and they exhibit more than considerable wariness about behavioral "laws" and over-reaching interpretive schemes—in short, theory. They indeed generalize. But they almost always insist that generalizations apply to specific places in specific times.[8]

American history further complicates the general problem. The discipline is complex and sprawling, but historians of the United States, especially those teaching in U.S. universities, have often exhibited a particularly vigorous resistance to theory and theorizing about historical development. The point is well conveyed in the title of David W. Noble's *Historians against History.* Noble explored and excoriated historians such as Frederick Jackson Turner and Charles Beard because they saw America as a timeless space set apart from the corruption of time and historicity itself, as was the case with Europe. Noble, of course, argued that this concept of timeless space itself had stood as the theorized heart of American history for decades, even as it propounded an aggressive anti-theoretical bent.[9]

Where does this leave historians exploring religion in modern America, especially if, like me, one has moved from religion in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries, where historians expect religion to abound, to religion in Manhattan between the Gilded Age and the Kennedy election, where historians

Miller, transl. John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981).

7. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1902). Mordecai Kaplan's *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1934), was a far more sophisticated theoretical work on religion, especially in its modern setting, but it too was ignored by historians and religious studies scholars; Jon Butler, "Three Minds, Three Books, Three Years: Reinhold Niebuhr, Perry Miller, and Mordecai Kaplan on Religion," *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* n.s., no. 2 (Winter 2006), 17-29.

8. A. Roger Ekirch, "Sometimes an Art, Never a Science, Always a Craft: A Conversation with Bernard Bailyn," *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd ser., 51:4 (1994), 625-658.

9. David W. Noble, *Historians against History: The Frontier Thesis and the National Covenant in American Historical Writing since 1830* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1965).

all but assume its lack of importance in the public if not private sphere? Certainly, American religious history has changed markedly since James published *Varieties of Religious Experience* to such lack of interest among historians at the turn of the century. What once was called "church history" has almost vanished. The principal journal of the history of Christianity published in the United States, *Church History*, recently added a subtitle to make it relevant to a reconstructed discipline: *Studies in Christianity and Culture*. Denominational history journals still exist but seldom attract readers outside their denominational sphere. Graduate schools no longer train historians for denominational seminaries and not only because budget pressures have forced seminaries to choose faculty in pastoral counseling above historians. I was not alone in a certain embarrassment recently when a Lutheran seminary wrote to ask if I could recommend any Yale history students for a faculty position in Lutheran church history in the United States and Europe. What could I say except that we no longer focused on such a specific church-related topic (did I reveal my prejudices and say that we no longer focused on such a "narrow" topic?) and required placing Lutheran church history in a larger national or international context.

In fact, today it would be difficult to find a significant book that exemplified the old "church history." Jay Dolan's *The Catholic Experience in America* and Jonathan Sarna's *American Judaism: A New History* may look like standard histories. But they move so far into the social context, the relationship of the group experience to American secular life, and the role of gender in creating the social setting for religion and important elements of the religious experience itself, that they instead exemplify the death of traditional denominational history, with its focus on "bricks and mortar history"—the name Roman Catholic historians gave the genre—the lists of new church buildings and the labors of (largely male) religious leaders. Dolan and Sarna do write about buildings and leaders. But they also focus on the religious experience of men and women who are Roman Catholics and Jews. This could not be said of the old denominational history.[10]

This brings us back to theory. What role must it play in the history of religion in the United States? I face this problem acutely in my study of religion in Manhattan between about 1870 and 1960. At least this is what I thought when I began some years ago: my principal problem would be defining religion in what Billy Graham termed "Sodom on the Subway," his nickname for New York City when he announced a "crusade" there for the summer of 1957.[11]

Yet, so far, and at the risk of no little arrogance, my problem is not so much defining religion as it is understanding modernity and, then, in understanding religion in the context of modernity. I would begin where I began fifteen years

10. *Ibid.*; Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A New History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

11. Curtis Mitchell, *God in the Garden: The Story of the Billy Graham New York Crusade* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1957), 9; Marshall Frady, *Billy Graham, A Parable of American Righteousness* (Boston: Little Brown, 1979), 293. I have not yet discovered the origins of the phrase "Sodom on the Subway." It may have derived from the nickname applied to Coney Island; see Oliver Pilat and Jo Ranson, *Sodom by the Sea: An Affectionate History of Coney Island* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1941).

ago in a book about religion in America between 1550 and 1865 entitled *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People*:

> Throughout this book, religion is taken to mean belief in and resort to superhuman powers, sometimes beings, that determine the course of natural and human events. This is what philosophers of religion call a "substantive" rather than a "functional" conceptualization. It describes what religion is rather than what religion does, and it is based on the work of the anthropologist Melford Spiro. With minor modifications in Spiro's formulation, religion here is associated with supernaturalism, with supernatural beliefs, and with the conviction that supernatural beings and powers can and do affect life as humans know it. Those who hold such views are taken to be religious. Those who reject or ignore them are not taken to be religious.[12]

To this, I would now reluctantly add a functional conceptualization of religion. The reluctance stems from the fact that boundaries for functionalist conceptualizations of religion are difficult to establish. As long as any beliefs act in ways that seem religious, they must be. But should explicitly non-theistic beliefs, such as an aggressively non-providential Marxism, really be regarded as religious because their adherents behave in ways that parallel radical evangelical Protestants, a similarity pointed up decades ago (for different purposes) in Michael Walzer's *The Revolution of the Saints*?[13]

Our answers to this question will be varied. Still, the blurred lines between substantive and functionalist conceptions of religion emerge in Paul Tillich's famous formulation about the "ground of being" as the essence of God. Tillich's work is infinitely complex, and he could well complain about the reductionism that his ideas have suffered. But the appropriation of Tillich's "ground of being" to refer to any foundation for individual moral and ethical life in public and private is itself important for the historian of modern religion precisely because of its popularity. Taken together, both the substantive and functionalist conceptions of religion may be expressed in institutional form in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries but could appear in privatized versions as well.[14]

I do not believe that most historians of American religion agonize much about conceptualizations of religion that implicitly or explicitly guide their scholarship. We accept, indeed welcome, the demise of an exclusively institutional approach to religion, and with greater or lesser success we write histories that no longer observe tight denominational and institutional focus. And for better or worse we have all become social historians of religion, perhaps so much so that some of us may secretly long for opportunities to return to the intellectual history and theology that dominate Richard Fox's wonderful biography, *Reinhold Niebuhr*,

12. Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 3, citing Melford Spiro, "Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation," in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Banton (New York: F. A. Praeger, 1966), 85-126.

13. Michael Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965).

14. Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952); Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper, 1956); Paul Tillich, *Ultimate Concern: Tillich in Dialogue*, ed. D. Mackenzie Brown, 1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1965).

trying to remember that theology surely must remain important even amidst the intellectual tawdriness of our times.[15]

Rather, I think that the major problem for U.S. historians who work seriously with religion in modern America, and the one whose character and solution will require considerable systematic speculation about both fact and theory, is the problem of modernity and its relationship to religion. This may take us back to conceptualizations of religion, but not without considerable learning about modernity.

Max Weber and Sigmund Freud framed at least part of the problem, although history has not produced the results they anticipated or desired, especially not in the United States. They made different but strong cases for the inability (for Weber) and the undesirability (for Freud) of religion to survive the rise of modernity. In arguing that religion represented premodern sensibilities, they established the boundaries of the debate about secularization. Moreover, they were not wrong to describe the many incompatibilities and tensions between religion and what we might all agree are critical features of modern life—urban, multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-national, economically globalized, bureaucratic, technologically-driven, popular yet not necessarily democratic politics, and a demand for power and control made more alluring by the apparent possession of real means to desired ends.[16]

In addition, late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American denominational leaders touted the incompatibility of modernity with religion. The denominational leaders, for example, could only imagine a future of complete degradation because this is what they believed modernity had wrought in their own time, especially as it had been realized in modern urban life. John Lancaster Spalding, Bishop of Peoria, lamented in 1880 that "In the city[,] old age and childhood are thrust out of sight, and the domestic morals and simple manners, which are above all price, ceased to be handed down as sacred heirlooms."[17]

But Weber, Freud, and the denominational leaders also made assumptions about modernity (and perhaps about religion) that are not confirmed by either the American experience since 1865 or the emerging history of so-called "third world" nations. The problem centers on religion's surprising adaptability to modernity's conditions, certainly outside Europe, as well as the adaptability of modernity to tolerate or absorb religiosity.

15. Richard Wightman Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985).

16. Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, transl. Talcott Parsons (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993); Peter Gay, *A Godless Jew: Freud, Atheism, and the Making of Psychoanalysis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987); Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990); Jean-François Lyotard, *The Post-Modern Condition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985). For a historian's early attempt to grapple with this topic, see Richard D. Brown, *Modernization: The Transformation of American Life 1600–1865* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976), which pushes the modernization process back into the American colonial era, an approach followed in my book, *Becoming America: The Revolution before 1776* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

17. The litany of denominational complaints is well captured in the sources reprinted in *The Church and the City*, ed. Robert D. Cross (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), which includes portions of John Lancaster Spalding's book, *The Religious Mission of the Irish People and Catholic Colonization* (New York: Catholic Colonization Society, 1880), 3-28, Spalding quotation on p. 19.

This gulf between religion and modernity not only typified late-nineteenth-century intellectuals and religious leaders but continues to afflict contemporary theorizing about modernity. The work of two scholars seems especially useful here. Stuart Hall's introduction to his massive edited book, *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies*, prosaically sets out "four defining features or characteristics of modern societies" that focus intently on religion and its disappearance: "the dominance of secular forms of political power and authority," "a monetarized exchange economy," "the decline of the traditional social order," and "the decline of the religious world-view typical of traditional societies and the rise of a secular and materialist culture." By Hall's measure, then, modernity is inherently and explicitly secular; the absence of religion is not merely an artifact of modernization but is critical to three of the four analytical characteristics Hall attaches to modernity.[18]

Yet modernity in both Manhattan and the United States—assuming we are as modern as we think we are—has not produced the disappearance of religion that Weber, Freud, and late-nineteenth-century American religious leaders anticipated and that Hall insists is central to the concept of modernity. This surprise creates problems for historians of religion in the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries, who find it awkward to argue that religion not only survived but prospered in between the American Civil War and the re-election of President George W. Bush. As a result, most general histories of religion in America adopt a subtle tone of declension—the "jeremiad tradition," in Sacvan Bercovitch's memorable phrase—despite the rather steady flowering of aggressive public religiosity in America since the 1960s. When a Middle East news agency reported in late September 2005 that President Bush had openly claimed in an interview that God spoke to him about invading Iraq, neither supporters nor critics initially found the claim implausible, although the White House later denied its accuracy. But the White House does not deny the accuracy of reports that it vetted the nominations of Harriet Miers and Samuel Alito for a Supreme Court vacancy through evangelical Christian interest groups so they could be satisfied that Miers and Alito would advance the groups' carefully honed "moral agenda." In the early-twenty-first century United States, then, religion stands at the center of politics with a thoroughness that Weber would have found unbelievable, that Freud would have found dismaying, and that nineteenth-century religious leaders might have found pleasing if perplexing.[19]

But how are we to describe this religious success in what by most any standard should have emerged as among the most secular nations on earth epitomized by New York City if not Washington, D.C.?

It is not responsible to discuss religion in America between 1950 and 2006 as though the concept could possibly hold the same or even similar meaning that it

18. *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies*, ed. Stuart Hall, David Held, Don Hubert, and Kenneth Thompson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 8.

19. Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978); "Bush's God Comment Stirs Press Fury," at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4322228.stm (accessed September 5, 2006); Brian MacQuarrie, "Dobson Spiritual Empire Wields Political Clout," *Boston Globe* (October 9, 2005); Jon Butler, "Jack-in-the-Box Faith? The Religion Problem in Modern American History," *Journal of American History* 90:4 (2004), 1357-1378.

held in 1700, 1800, or 1900. Historians will need to look beyond the immediate historical literature and possibly even to theory about religion to confront this problem, and for a simple reason: the current scholarly literature simply does not explain how religion has remained so resilient in the United States since the 1870s given the massive transformation of American society from a still largely rural agricultural society to the world's leading industrial nation, especially in the aggressive forms in which religion shapes not only personal life in America but politics as well. American historians are only very gingerly approaching this subject in ways that move beyond still relatively meager description to explanation.

Nor does the literature on European modernization and religion help us greatly. Kenneth Thompson's essay on religion in Hall's *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies* treats its subject as though religious groups and believers had disappeared and that they had been displaced by secular men and women seeking an "ideological community" perhaps best conceptualized (or not) by Michel Foucault or Benedict Anderson. For Thompson, religion emerges as a historical phenomenon whose "traces . . . do not necessarily disappear from modern society as the inevitable result of a unilinear process of secularization," although, in fact, they remain faint traces against the intellectual power of Foucault or Anderson. Certainly, however, Thompson has not driven through central Indiana, from Bloomington in the south to South Bend in the north, to wonder at the extraordinary array of new churches whose parking lots jammed with SUVs surely represent more than mere traces of premodern religiosity or walked the streets of Manhattan to view not only the city's great religious monuments—Central Synagogue, St. Patrick's Cathedral, the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, or Riverside Church—but also the quirky religious buildings stuffed by the hundreds into every conceivable and even inconceivable space found in Manhattan..[20]

Where to go, then, when indeed the subject is modern Manhattan? Perhaps the route is circular or at least elliptical. If so, secularity would be a good place to begin. Does secularity require religionlessness, as Hall and so many others infer and assume, much less the anti-religious regimen enforced in those epitomes of secularity, the Soviet Union and its satellite nations and especially Billy Graham's "Sodom on the Subway"? And if so, is secularity a critical ingredient—even *the* critical ingredient—in modernity?

Space precludes any serious discussion of secularity here. But Talal Asad's *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* is particularly important in pointing up the difficulties of assuming a fixedness to the concept of secularity. On the other side, so to speak, Asad's *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, argues that the concept of "religion" employed by most scholars is a distinctly historical and Western construction closely linked to Christianity and not always sensitive to the fullest dimensions of spirituality, including spiritual dimensions present in modern societies. Asad's points are not mere semantic games. Jonathan Z. Smith goes further, arguing that "religion" is a scholarly construct itself—a tool—and

20. Kenneth Thompson, "Religion, Values, and Ideology," in *Modernity*, ed. Hall *et al.*, 395-422, quotations on 420.

reflects scholars' choices made from many kinds of perhaps rightly chosen or mistakenly chosen purposes. Even granting certain elliptical indulgences in these arguments, Asad's and Smith's theoretical challenges should sensitize historians to the danger of assuming constant and unchanging qualities to either secularity or religion, almost especially in modern times.[21]

When Billy Graham castigated New York City as "Sodom on the Subway" he meant that the city's modernity necessitated its abandonment of religion, not that it had returned to Biblical times, just on the wrong side. But is it possible that twentieth-century New York demonstrated a new understanding of modernity, and perhaps of secularity as well, in which religion survived and prospered in ways Weber, Freud, and denominational leaders simply did not anticipate?[22]

Here, we might focus on a relatively open-ended concept of modernity found in Matei Calinescu's *Five Faces of Modernity*. Calinescu, whose principal concern is literature and art, writes that the modern concerns "a major cultural shift from a time-honored aesthetics of permanence, based on a belief in an unchanging and transcendent ideal of beauty, to an aesthetics of transitoriness and imminence, whose central values are change and novelty." Little wonder, then, that he quotes Baudelaire in summary: "Modernity is the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art, of which the other half is the eternal and the immutable."[23]

Even if Calinescu still rather habitually associates religion with the premodern, his linkage of modernity with transitoriness, imminence, change, and novelty or, like Baudelaire, the fugitive and the contingent, also points almost precisely toward modern theologies of daring, greater openness, and risk-taking, including specifically modern theologies not only present in but nourished by mid-twentieth-century New York. Calinescu himself describes how the so-called "death of God" movement "appears to have opened a new era of religious quest" and cites the importance of Paul Tillich's role in dropping even the name of God "to speak of the 'fundament of our existence.'" Calinescu could as easily have pointed to New York's Abraham Joshua Heschel and Mordecai Kaplan as Jewish theologians for whom modernity's unsettledness led to extraordinarily creative theological responses. Heschel used the transitoriness of modernity to emphasize the sense of awe and wonder inspired by the divine, and in *Judaism as a Civilization* (1932) Mordecai Kaplan argued that the very shock of modernity offered Jews nothing less than a unique opportunity to salvage Judaism. As Kaplan wrote, with imagination and discipline, "the contemporary crisis in Jewish life will prove to be the birth-throes of a new era in the civilization of the Jewish people."[24]

21. Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

22. Jon Butler, "Religion in New York City: Faith That Could Not Be," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 22 (2004), 51-61.

23. Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1987), 3; Baudelaire quotation on 4-5.

24. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Farrar Straus & Young, 1951); Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1996); Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*, 522. On the importance of Kaplan's book, see *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* 12

How did this survival and prosperity for what at least seems to be religion occur in Manhattan and other modern American cities and suburbs? One potentially promising avenue of investigation centers on syncretism. Syncretism is a concept too often applied only to certain religious expressions, in American history especially to traditions linked to the African-American communities and in world religion to the history of missions in all the major religious systems. There are reasons for this emphasis, of course, because the shift from non-Christian to Christian religious practice among enslaved Africans especially seems implicitly syncretistic. In American history, older books by Albert Raboteau and John Blassingame and the recent work of Sylvia Frey and Betty Wood both assume and demonstrate the necessity of syncretism in making the African-American religious tradition, and in the history of Christian missions especially, syncretism has been both a lure and a difficulty for missionaries and non-Christians alike.[25]

But the history of religion in New York City and other American cities suggests that understanding syncretism may be critical to understanding both immigrant and non-immigrant religion in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Elizabeth McAlister's recent book, *Rara! Vodou, Power, and Performance in Haiti and its Diaspora*, suggests an almost never-ending syncretistic process empowered by modernity and its modern male and female immigrant practitioners amidst premodern and modern conditions simultaneously. Haitian Rara is strengthened by its adaptations, not weakened by them, and the stark differences between an almost premodern Haiti and a distinctly modern New York make the syncretistic process in religion all the more striking. The experience of Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs suggests that the one-way concept of assimilation is simply too innocuous to describe the syncretistic changes that immigrants effect in order to survive and indeed prosper in America. Many of these immigrants simply do not assimilate but shape the urban setting to their own ends. Afro-Cuban immigrants in New York and New Jersey make cramped apartments work as sacred spaces in ways that enlarge both the sense of the sacred and the feeling of space.[26]

And in Manhattan, the other boroughs of New York City, and the New York and New Jersey suburbs, syncretism might as much be practiced by third-,

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(Winter 2006), which focuses on Kaplan's *Judaism as a Civilization.*

25. John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972); John W. Blassingame, *Black New Orleans, 1860–1880* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973); Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); *Syncretism in Religion: A Reader*, ed. Anita Maria Leopold and Jepe Sinding Jensen (New York: Routledge, 2005), 16-17.

26. Elizabeth A. McAlister, *Rara! Vodou, Power, and Performance in Haiti and its Diaspora* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Raymond Brady Williams, *Religions of Immigrants from India and Pakistan: New Threads in the American Tapestry* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988); *Studying the Sikhs: Issues for North America*, ed. John Stratton Hawley and Gurinder Singh Mann (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993); Gurinder Singh Mann, Paul David Numrich, and Raymond B. Williams, *Buddhists, Hindus, and Sikhs in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); David H. Brown, "Afro-Cuban Religions and the Urban Landscape in Cuba and the United States," in *Gods of the City: Religion and the American Urban Landscape*, ed. Robert A. Orsi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 155-230.

fourth-, and fifth-generation Episcopalians, Methodists, Jews, and Catholics as by Haitian participants in Rara processions. Does the turn toward "spirituality" among 1980s and 1990s mainline Christian groups, whose members purchase all those volumes so prominently displayed in the "New Age" section of Barnes and Noble stores throughout New York, tell us something about mainline syncretism that clergy already reluctantly understand? And what of evangelical syncretism? Pat Robertson's powerful Christian Broadcasting Network is paralleled by a bevy of Christian financial advisors easily located with a Google search on the term "Christian financial." Perhaps professors concerned about their TIAA/CREF accounts should contact Jim and Janet Elder of ElderAdo Financial, whose "world headquarters" is located in Montrose, Colorado; the Elders claim that "the Bible has over 2000 verses that deal with money, finances and financial planning" and that "a competent Christian financial advisor . . . can be very advantageous when trying to maximize investment performance."[27]

The approach is archetypically American and simultaneously modern. It lies at the heart of Norman Vincent Peale's 1952 best seller, *The Power of Positive Thinking*, itself a mélange of good-feeling Christianity and a decidedly non-Christian American New Thought movement of the 1890s. Like Ralph Waldo Trine, whose book *In Tune with the Infinite* remained the New Thought movement's most popular publication, it was not an accident that Peale emphasized power as much as positive thinking. Peale's was a Christianity for secular success, not monastic introspection.[28]

In this instance, the interplay of theory and history moves in contradictory directions. A recent fascinating collection of essays on syncretism—*Syncretism in Religion: A Reader*—perhaps ironically suggests the intellectual instability in the theory of syncretism. The preface and general introduction each tellingly begin with examples rather than definitions: the experience of one editor as "the child of a German-Jewish father and a Swedish-Protestant mother" described in the preface; and a story about the parents' different reactions to the editor's "childhood dog, 'Bamse,' who was a mongrel of a Danish farm dog and who knows what else" that is used to open the general introduction. Syncretism itself remains undefined by the editors. Only one essay, by Ulrich Berner, "The Concept of 'Syncretism': An Instrument of Historical Insight/Discovery?" substantially tackles the problem of conceptualizing syncretism, and the most interesting essays describe instances of spiritual eclecticism and interchange as examples of a still largely undefined syncretism, the most powerful being an excerpt from Roger Bastide's amazing forty-year-old book, *The African Religions of Brazil: Toward a Sociology of the Interpenetration of Civilizations*.[29]

27. Brenda E. Brasher, *Give Me that Online Religion*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004); on September 5, 2006, ElderAdo Financial Services offered two "home pages" at its internet sites. At http://www.elderadofinancial.com, web visitors could find a page with no Christian content that emphasized informed and disciplined financial planning, while at http://www.elderadofinancial.com/Default.htm, web visitors could find a web page marketing a "faith based Christian Financial Planning firm that blends our faith along with traditional financial planning standards."

28. Carol V. R. George, *God's Salesman: Norman Vincent Peale and the Power of Positive Thinking* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 86-88.

29. *Syncretism in Religion*, ed. Leopold and Jensen, ix, 2-3; Ulrich Berner, "The Concept of

Yet the relative chaos of religion in modern New York and in the modern world and the peculiarities of its character raise the potential usefulness of theories circulating around the idea of syncretism to make sense of patterns inhabiting this seeming chaos. Hermann Gunkel's 1903 argument that "early Christianity was a syncretistic religion," which is resuscitated in a Hans Kippenberg essay, reminds us that religious interaction is persistent and even ancient, not just modern and limited to obscure religions. Syncretism is inherent in religion and is dynamic rather than aberrant and dysfunctional. Robert Baird's argument that syncretism is inherently inconsistent, if not unstable, speaks to the dynamics and power that syncretism exploits and sometimes creates. In New York, these perspectives help make sense of new religious movements such as Christian Science, Pentecostalism, Father Divine's Peace Mission Movement, and Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League, as well as the dynamics inside more traditional denominational traditions. Our ability to understand how New York City Protestants, Catholics, and Jews resolved or failed to resolve language, ethnic, national, liturgical, and theological differences within their broader traditions would benefit from theories surrounding the syncretistic process, even if (or precisely because) the concept of syncretism seldom is applied to the internal histories of large-scale traditional religious movements. Moreover, theory about syncretism may help us better explain what Roger Bastide might have called cultural "interpenetration," in this case the interpenetration of secularity and religion in New York City's Garveyite movement or, out west, at ElderAdo Financial Services, despite the fact that the discussions of syncretism focus on religion alone rather than on relations between religion and secular culture.[30]

Finally, modern New York forces us to consider the meaning of religious freedom in modern times. Billy Graham's condemnatory image of "Sodom on the Subway" uplifts New York's overt secularism by acknowledging and implicitly criticizing the apparent inclination of the modern city to support a liberal religious pluralism, with its challenge to a fading Protestant, if not Christian, homogeneity. Yet perhaps both Graham and enthusiasts celebrating the union of religious freedom with urban modernity were and are wrong. The larger and specific history of the twentieth century's Holocaust, the Bosnian–Serb–Croatian conflict in the former Yugoslavia, and the religious wars of the Middle East and Africa, suggest that New York might be the exception that proves the solemn rule that religious freedom is a rarity even and especially in modern times. And the jarring title of Winnifred Fallers Sullivan's *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* is made all the more alarming because Sullivan argues that the constitutional, statutory, and case law on religious freedom in modern America actually suppresses it. "The 'return' of religion takes place in a space structured and conditioned by law—

'Syncretism': An Instrument of Historical Insight/Discovery?," in *Syncretism in Religion*, 295-315; Roger Bastide, "Problems of Religious Syncretism," in *Syncretism in Religion*, 113-139.

30. Hans G. Kippenberg, "In Praise of *Syncretism*: The Beginnings of Christianity Conceived in the Light of a Diagnosis of Modern Culture," in *Syncretism in Religion*, ed. Leopold and Jensen, 29-38, Gunkel quotation on 29; Robert D. Baird, "Syncretism and the History of Religions," in *Syncretism in Religion*, 48-58.

secular law, the 'rule of law,' a law that enjoys an unprecedented hegemony." As a result, Sullivan writes, "religious communities, like other private associations, are extensively regulated, as they always have been."[31]

Sullivan offers a nearly shocking theoretical perspective on the possibility of religious freedom in the modern state, especially in America. But does the regulation even of religious communities explicitly deny religious freedom? Did it ever? In New York, did regulation prove detrimental or helpful to religion or to freedom? And whose religion and freedom were being expanded or hindered, that of Billy Graham or of Norman Vincent Peale or of Father Divine or of the Afro-Cuban practice of Ocha or Arará? And if they mean so many different things, do we say anything coherent when we say they all represent God in Gotham? It is the historian's task to answer these questions, in this case raised anew by a challenge to our assumptions about modern religious freedom.[32]

This brings us almost deceitfully back to the question of theory and its importance to religious history. If those of us writing the history of religion in America admittedly and sometimes aggressively have eschewed questions about conceptualizing religion, as in the stony silence with which historians greeted James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*, our difficulty in comprehending the survival and prosperity of religion in what appear to be modern times gives James's work and that of other theorists of religion more relevance than less. The reason is simple: who else can help us sort out conflicts among conceptions of modernity and religion before we can ever move from description to explanation?

If American historians continue in their purely descriptive mode, we will indeed have more books about the look of religion in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The best of them will be fascinating: Robert Orsi's almost famous books on twentieth-century Catholicism, *The Madonna of 115th Street* and *Thank You, St. Jude*, Etan Diamond's study of Orthodox Jews in suburban Toronto, *And I Will Dwell in Their Midst*, and Grant Wacker's study of early American Pentecostalism, *Heaven Below*. Each grapples with the problem of explaining religion's persistence in seemingly secular and modern times, and Orsi "theorizes" most obviously, especially in the introduction to the second edition of *Madonna of 115th Street*, as well as in the introduction to an edited book on the persistence of religion in modern American urban life, *Gods of the City*.[33]

Of course, it may be depressing to learn how many historians skip the theorizing. My guess is that most head straight for the description—for Orsi's wonder-

31. Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 153-154.

32. Jill Watts, *God, Harlem U.S.A.: The Father Divine Story* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 72-81, relates how town officials in Sayville, N.Y., on Long Island, used and developed local ordinances to restrict the congregational activities of Father Divine in the 1930s.

33. Robert A. Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880–1950*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); Orsi, *Thank You, St. Jude: Women's Devotion to the Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996); *Gods of the City: Religion and the American Urban Landscape*, ed. Robert A. Orsi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); Etan Diamond, *And I Will Dwell in Their Midst: Orthodox Jews in Suburbia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

ful accounts of Italian family life and the lure of the patron saint of lost causes for modern women struggling with divorce, lower wages, child care, and sickness; for Diamond's reconstruction of orthodox community amidst the alleged anonymity of the suburb; for Wacker's insistence on the believability of God's presence in urban and rural America alike, both undergoing modernization with amazing thoroughness.

Still, without self-consciously re-imagining religion and secularity and the relationship of religion to modernity, our histories of religion in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and beyond will become aimless chronicles, a retreat back to the origins of history in mere catalogues of events that never assess cause or context. What a fate for a subject—religion—where claims about cause and context are everything.

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